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EDUCATION AND THE CRISIS OF OUR TIME.

BY- MAYER, FREDERICK

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THE OPINIONS OF SEVERAL EXISTENTIAL THINKERS AND OTHER PHILOSOPHERS PROVIDE A FRAMEWORK FOR THIS DISCUSSION OF THE CRISIS OF MODERN CIVILIZATION. IT IS FELT THAT EDUCATION BOTH REFLECTS AND IS A FORCE IN THE STANDARDIZATION, MECHANIZATION, AND DEHUMANIZATION OF CONTEMPORARY LIFE. HOWEVER, EDUCATION CAN PLAY A CONSTRUCTIVE ROLE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF CHANGE. TO DO SO, EDUCATIONAL THEORY SHOULD BE REORIENTED TO EMPHASIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF "CONCRETE ACTUALITY," AND INNER-DIRECTEDNESS, AND MEANINGFUL RELATIONS WITHOUT DOGMATISM. IN THIS WAY EDUCATION CAN BECOME THE "TOOL OF SURVIVAL" FOR MODERN MAN. THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN "PHI DELTA KAPPAN," VOLUME 43, NUMBER 7, APRIL 1962. (NH)

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By FREDERICK MAYER

Education

And the Crisis of Our Time

Is the teacher, who ought to be the defender of civilization, its most negative and destructive critic? America's most widely-read philosopher of education discusses the role teachers must play if the schools are to be an important instrument of survival.

MANY thoughtful observers of the twentieth century have pointed to the disintegration of modern civilization. Like Spengler, they believe that decline is inevitable. Just as man has various phases, so culture is a deterministic structure and we are today in a state of winter. Spengler believed that no measure, no step, no ruler could postpone the decline of culture, just as the measures taken by Diocletian and Julian in ancient Rome were of no avail. Even our educational systems, according to Spengler, are symbols of decline and they tend to emphasize man's alienation from nature and his inability to develop real power and real vitality.

The pessimism regarding modern man is not confined to the philosophy of history. We find evidence of it in literature, especially in T. S. Eliot, although the latter takes refuge in his Anglican faith. Salinger in *The Catcher in the Rye* pictures the phoniness of modern society and education, which disgusts a youngster so much that he escapes to the temptations of New York where he finds a temporary refuge. Theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr speak of man's finiteness as both the source of his creativity and his sin. They feel that man cannot redeem himself alone, that he needs the aid of religious inspiration. Psychologists, like Freud, point to the contradiction between two drives of man: one leads toward life, the other leads toward death. It appeared to Freud that ultimately the death drive would be stronger and that it would triumph over the affirmative forces, that civilization would be doomed by man's hostilities.

Albert Schweitzer, while not accepting a Freudian viewpoint, asserted that modern man has lost his sense of primary relationships. Has he not become a victim of violence? Has he not worshiped the state? Has he not dehumanized himself? Has he not followed military leaders rather than spiritual prophets? Furthermore, Schweitzer believed that often education has aided the process of decline. It has been occupied with sweeping generalizations; it has divorced itself from great ethical concerns. The teacher, who ought to have been the defender of civilization, only too frequently has become its most negative and destructive critic.

GREAT existentialist thinkers like Jaspers, Marcel, and Camus have probably made the most penetrating diagnosis of the crisis of our time. Thus Jaspers in *Man in the Modern Age* points to the paradoxes of contemporary life. We have a practical philosophy which is not practical, a utilitarianism which does not work, a success ideal which does not bring happiness. Jaspers is ambivalent about modern man. He sees his possibilities and at the same time his destructive tendencies. Never before have there been so many potential avenues of individuality and yet never before has life been so standardized and devoid of inner meaning. The philosopher, according to Jaspers, could only clarify and illuminate a few aspects of existence which is enveloped in a twilight of irrationality. *Man in the Modern Age*

MR. MAYER *(Alpha Epsilon 2584) is professor of philosophy and the humanities, University of Redlands, Calif. He is also perhaps the most widely read author writing today in the field of education. His novel,* Web of Hate, *which includes a telling analysis of the ills of education in Nazi Germany, recently became available on newsstands in paperback form. Other Mayer works published recently are* Creative Universities *and* A History of Educational Thought. *The latter is widely used as a textbook.*

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was written three years before Hitler took over Germany and it predicted that the mass man would gain a crushing victory in his disregard of morality and humanitarianism.

Marcel, in *Man Against Mass Society,* echoed Jaspers in his stress upon the nature of the crisis confronting modern man. To him, it was a crisis which transcended political issues. The protagonists of the left were concerned mainly with the class struggle. They saw life as an economic problem. In reality, this was not the main issue, according to Marcel, who emphasized the spiritual nature of the crisis. As for the forces of the right, they were so enamored with tradition and so concerned about the status quo that they could not propound a just world order. Furthermore, their callousness almost made revolution an inevitability. Marcel showed how ideologies depend on personal preference. We prefer that movement which benefits us. We say that truth cannot tolerate error; in reality it is our self-interest which cannot compete with the self-interest of others. To Marcel, the political arena was almost like the world of Hobbes; it was like a jungle in which the individual has lost his identity.

To Camus, in such books as *The Plague, The Rebel,* and *The Myth of Sisyphus,* the entire human situation is one of absurdity. This means a vast chasm between actuality and ideal, between achievement and expected goal. To Camus, the external world is indifferent to man, whose moral strivings have no cosmic significance. We are all condemned by death, whether we are believers or non-believers, scholars or laymen, kings or beggars. Our time is limited and yet we waste it in meaningless activities. There is no supernatural power which can help us; no heaven which can be our final destination. Science at best is a hypothesis; its picture of the universe is as symbolic as that of poetry. Man's intelligence is limited by ultimate situations, yet man cannot abdicate his limited reason.

The evil of modern man, according to Camus, lies in his feeling of abstract justice. Thus the individual is subordinated to the group and malicious means are used to accomplish questionable ends. Murder becomes a legitimate tool of public policy. As Camus stated in an eloquent passage: "The land of humanism has become the Europe of today, the land of inhumanity."

THE same crisis that Camus discovered in modern civilization exists in modern education. Education is an ambivalent process. It can lead to a more soulless culture; it can make man even more mechanized; it can remove the individual even more from ethical concerns; it can lead to a group-centered life or it can emancipate the individual and lead to a life of genuine responsibility and genuine self-actualization.

Such a goal demands more than a financial investment. We can spend money to perpetuate obsolesence. We can, by a false materialistic philosophy, magnify the evils of our time. The idea that material support will cure all the educational evils of our time is an exaggeration. Undoubtedly, the lack of a real financial investment in education is crucial, but it is only one part of the problem, which has deeper implications.

There are others who feel that what modern society needs is more competent individuals. They plead for a more aristocratic view of the school system, which they want to make harder. They cry for more academic subjects. Again this view is limited. Too often mere academic excellence is removed from the realities of life; too often it is an escape to the ivory tower; too often it represents merely an ornamental view of the educative process.

Some thinkers, like Maritain, believe that we need more religious education in our time. We often hear the charge that public education is atheistic and that it does not give to the student a sense of genuine morality. Actually, the public school system with its emphasis on pluralistic attitudes is an aspect of morality. Its openness to new ideas, its stress upon tolerance, its emphasis upon cooperation—all these attitudes represent a genuine advance in ethical thinking. Furthermore, religious education has often meant denominationalism, whereby intolerance has been increased and prejudice has prevailed. All this does not deny the value of a genuine religious experience. The point is that this experience should be found in an existential sense when the individual seeks a feeling of authenticity and meaning and decides to live a more penetrating life.

Education can be a tool of destruction for modern man. It can divert the energies of the most creative individuals so that they will be occupied by minor concerns; it can create a dependence upon authority which constantly threatens democratic ideals. It can encourage group conformity which leads to a totalitarianism of the spirit. It can emphasize the physical sciences so much that the humanities are slighted and so that external space is explored while internal space is overlooked. It can create such an impersonal spirit that the individual student feels lost and alienated. It can be centered upon externals so that the teacher is treated like a clerk who passes on knowledge in a mechanical way. It can succumb

to pressure groups and thus avoid controversy, which is at the heart of the educative process. In short, education can be the prelude to Orwell's *1984*—a wasteland of impersonality in which group feeling prevails, in which freedom has been abrogated, in which privacy has been eliminated and the individual has become a willing object for state exploitation.

Education cannot be confined to the schoolrooms. Education does not imply individual irresponsibility, an evasion of our social obligations. It means, on the contrary, as Socrates showed, that the teacher has an obligation to change himself and humanity.

Education is tested by the *quality of relatedness*. If we as educators remain isolationists, if we are only concerned about the technical issues of pedagogy, if we overemphasize the importance of methods, we cannot give guidance to our students and even less to society.

If the kingdom of heaven is within man, then the kingdom of education cannot be formed in the external ritual but in the inner being of individuals and society. This emphasis upon inwardness, upon "agonizing subjective tensions," upon personal reorientation, may create a real revolution in education. It means a stress upon concrete actuality, not upon slogans. It implies a naturalistic perspective without cynicism, self-analysis without pessimism, affirmation without Babbitry, a strenuous striving for meaningful relations without dogmatism.

The crisis of our time can be a prelude to despair, creating a sense of futility in educational circles. It can also be the overture to concrete action through which education fights the culture lag of our time and thus becomes the tool of survival.

A Prospectus for High-School Graduates Who Read *Saturday Review* Classifieds

Disenchanted Teachers—tell me your gripes. Am collecting material for book on schools.
—A *Saturday Review* classified ad

By WILLIAM B. LIEURANCE

DISENCHANTED is an interesting word. It connotes the loss of magical qualities, a state of disillusion to be suffered, the forced undergoing of the consequences of having enjoyed some sort of spell. With all its gloomy aspects, it does have a compensating feature of "belongingness." It is, at least, not un-American, for one could hardly be more American than to be disenchanted.

There are compelling reasons for having been in a spell. Granted, the reasons are largely of recent history, but our latest ex-President is taking quite an interest in public affairs now and is beginning to withdraw our accustomed diet of tranquilizers. Thus the spellbound who were only participating in the American way of life on a "buy now, pay later" basis are being scolded for their lack of character and for their lousy moral code, which has now contaminated even the executive levels of the great electric companies and the board of the New York Stock Exchange.

Teachers must be counted as Americans too, and they have been amply cautioned to dis-enchant, among other things. Those who do not have the advantage of access to institutionalized leniency for moral lapses may now avail themselves of the therapeutic values of seeing their gripes in print.

This is not necessarily a bad thing. But for high-school graduates seeking admittance to an institution of higher learning (and a major), it may be helpful to look a little beyond the gripes of teachers or former teachers. After all, contemporary wisdom still holds that a soldier who does not gripe is no good as a soldier. We would not want prospecting graduates and prospective teachers to get a bad impression of the seventeenth-highest-paid profession.

Some of us agree with Wendell Johnson, the semanticist, who calls the "enchanted-disenchanted" way of life "the IFD disease: from idealism to frustration to demoralization." He judges it to be "the basic design of our common maladjustment," of "epidemic proportions," and the most common ailment among university students.

But perhaps he is too serious in his charge. Perhaps some good can come of all this psychological decay. There may be evidence, though admittedly obscure, to buttress the teaching profession, whether

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